

CHURCH AND STATE PARTNERSHIP IN THE PROVISION OF QUALITY EDUCATION

Communiqué at the End of the First Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at the Divine Love Retreat and Conference Centre Sabon Lugbe, Abuja, March 8-14, 2014

1. Preamble

We, the members of Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), at the conclusion of our First Plenary Meeting of the year 2014, send prayerful greetings to the Church and the people of Nigeria. At the Divine Love Retreat and Conference Centre (DRACC), Sabon-Lugbe, Abuja, from March 8 to 14, 2014, we prayed and reflected on the theme: "Church and State Partnership in Providing Quality Education for the Nigerian People". We now share the fruits of our reflection with the Church and the Nation.

2. Education in Nation Building

History shows that the Church started very early to invest heavily and fruitfully in quality education in what is now known as Nigeria. She established schools which were known for their good academic and moral standards, and their non-discriminatory policies, even in the difficult terrain of rural Nigeria. Prior to the government take-over of schools in the 1970s both the Church and the State were partners in education. As a result of the take-over, the initiatives of voluntary agencies were stifled, and the quality of education in Nigeria experienced and still experiences a sharp decline.

3. Provision of Quality Education

The good health of a nation is largely dependent on the quality of education of her citizens. The numerous problems affecting our country Nigeria are very obvious: corruption, abuse of power, insecurity, poverty, discrimination, to name but a few. We cannot confront these challenges without investing in the provision of quality education. With integral education, the human person is formed to be loving and caring, able to actualize his or her potential, contribute to the attainment of the common good and fulfill his or her aspiration. Quality education in this respect has a religious and moral content. Education, in the final analysis, is a means of cooperating with God to overcome evil and bring out the best in the human person.

4. Challenges Facing the Education Sector

Nigerians have a deep hunger for education. The quality of facilities in our schools, secondary schools, polytechnics and universities is not commensurate with the announced budgetary allocation, a fact which strongly suggests the invasion of the education space by corruption and misappropriation of public funds. The high cost of quality education places it well beyond the reach of the poor. Yet, some Nigerian parents are willing to sacrifice much, including personal comfort, in order to ensure that their children receive good education. Not finding schools good enough within Nigeria for their children, they send them around the world, not only to countries of Africa, but even to Europe, America and Asia.

The provision of high quality education that imparts intellectual, moral and professional competence, the good state of facilities in our institutions of learning, adequate remuneration of those who work in them, these and related factors pose grave fiscal challenges. The future of the education sector in Nigeria largely depends on planning, funding and proper management.

5. Funding of Education and Partner-Friendly Policies

Nigeria, therefore, needs to take an urgent look at the regulatory framework in the education sector. The current formulation and execution of policies in the education sector do not enable public-private partnership. We therefore urge Government to abrogate policies that impede partnership in education.

On the one hand, experience has shown that Government's sole funding of education is not realistic in our present circumstances. On the other hand, there are many parents who cannot fund the education of their children without assistance. This should not make Government take over the role that rightly belongs to parents. Rather, Government should, in line with the principle of subsidiarity, assist parents to play that role, so as to enable them to exercise their right to choose the type of education they want for their children. There is, therefore, need for synergy in funding education in Nigeria.

The provision of quality education should involve the government, parents, religious institutions and other corporate bodies. Nigerian children studying in mission and private schools should not be discriminated against. They have equal right to be properly educated. Their parents are tax payers. Government should assist in the provision of the necessary infrastructure, tax relief for parents of children in school and demand minimal charges on the land on which mission and private schools are built. In addition, in the spirit of partnership, we urge Government to reinstate grants-in-aid to mission schools, in order to make quality education affordable.

6. Return of Schools to their Original Owners

In light of the foregoing, we acknowledge the wisdom and courage of leadership in some state governments that have returned the schools to their original owners and have created a measure of partnership with them. Some States like Anambra and Benue have gone further to allocate funds for the rehabilitation of those schools returned. This step has led to the improvement of infrastructure and learning environment in such schools. These positive results lead us to renew our call for the return of the remaining schools to their original owners.

7. Insecurity and Destruction of Life

We bemoan heightened insecurity in our country. In recent times we have seen how the problem of insecurity affects education. The mindless massacre of innocent students right in their schools in the North Eastern States of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe is a very painful case. Despite the efforts of security agencies, life and property in Nigeria are still exposed to people of wicked intentions. While we commend the work of men and women in the security agencies, we urge government to be proactive and to ensure that they are better equipped and motivated to assume their responsibilities of protecting the land and its citizens. We ask the government to investigate escalating conflicts between cattle-rearers and indigenous communities in all the States of the North and the Middle Belt with a view to finding lasting solutions for peace and reconciliation. It needs to assist victims of the Boko-Haram insurgency, and of the murderous Herdsmen.

8. Veritas University of Nigeria Abuja (VUNA)

As part of the Church's usual contribution to Education in Nigeria, the Veritas University of Nigeria was established. We are grateful to God, to benefactors of the University, and to its management and staff led by Professor Michael Kwanashie. We commend all the lay faithful for supporting the establishment and the running thus far of Veritas University. We pray the good Lord to bless all for their generosity, while we count on their continued support in further pursuit to quality education. We

thank the Archdiocese of Abuja for funding the construction of the first academic block at the Abuja main campus, the Knights St Mulumba for the construction of the University Chapel, which has reached an advanced stage, and the Knights of St John International for donating a block of classrooms.

In further pursuit of quality education across Nigeria, we, the Bishops of Nigeria, are organizing our second National Catholic Education Summit at Abuja, from October 28 to 31, 2014.

9. The Family and Human Life

In the light of various global attacks on Human Life, Marriage and the Family, which work to erode Christian and Cultural values, we urge all to join in the preparation for the forthcoming Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in October 2014 under the theme: "Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization". We congratulate all the dioceses in Nigeria which took part in recent consultations on the family initiated by the Holy See. As further preparation for the Synod, we, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, are organizing a Seminar on Pro-Life issues under the theme: "Witnessing to the Dignity of every Human Life". It will take place in Abuja from June 5 to 7, 2014 at This Day Dome, International Central Business District, Abuja. We hope in this way to affirm Christian families, Youth and organizations that promote the culture of life. We urge all people of goodwill to fully support the forthcoming Seminar.

10. Centenary Celebration

We congratulate Nigeria on the centenary of her amalgamation and thank God for His blessings to the Nation. For our omissions and commissions, we beg Him for pardon and promise to work for a more united and prosperous country. We also, ask our leaders to put the interest of the citizens first and all to be law abiding.

11. National Conference

As we look forward with fellow Nigerians to the forthcoming National Conference with hope, we expect the Conference to devise ways and means of fostering the right of each person to freely choose, profess, disseminate and practise his or her own religion in private and in public, as well as acknowledge the contributions of religion to nation building. Where this right is not well protected, peaceful co-existence and participation in social, political and economic life are endangered. Nigeria is a multi-cultural country. Therefore, to adopt any religion as a State religion at the Federal or State level will lead to favoritism and partiality which deprive the rest of equality before the law. In the spirit of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Government at all levels should handle religious matters discretely.

Given the level of insecurity in our land, and the need to address the issue of citizenship in our country, special attention should be paid to what ought to be the relationship between the State and the citizen, and between fellow citizens across Nigeria. The Conference should be equally concerned about fundamental issues such as how to make our public and civil service officials more accountable, more selfless and more devoted to duties. It should ask serious questions and make recommendations about youth welfare, welfare of pensioners; study how to neutralize an environment saturated with the toxic culture of corruption, the ungodly struggle for political power, the exorbitant cost of governance and, above all, evolve effective strategies to avoid the painful and embarrassing terrorist situation brought about by some factors perhaps previously neglected. We urge delegates to the Conference to place the interest of the people of Nigeria over and above every other consideration. As we pray for the success of the Conference, we appeal to government to allow the will of the people to prevail.

12.Events in the Church

On March 13, 2014, we celebrated the first anniversary of the election of Pope Francis. We give thanks to God for giving him to the Church as servant in the Petrine-Ministry and for using him to reawaken in the world a new appreciation of the person and Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On December 12, 2013, the Holy Father, Pope Francis, appointed the Nuncio to Nigeria the Holy See's Permanent Observer at the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

On January 24, 2014, Most Rev. Gabriel Abegunrin, hitherto, Bishop of Osogbo was installed the new Archbishop of Ibadan, following the retirement of Most Rev Felix Alaba Job after 42 years of devoted pastoral leadership of the Archdiocese.

We extend our joyful and prayerful sentiments to the Archbishop of Jos, Most Rev. Ignatius Kaigama, on his appointment and installation as Chancellor of Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu; and to the Bishop of Sokoto, Most Rev. Matthew Hassan Kukah on his appointment as Chancellor of the Nassarawa State University.

13.Conclusion

We urge all in the Church to use this holy Season of Lent and its spiritual exercises as a means of personal and collective renewal in the love of God and neighbour. We look forward to the canonization in Rome on April 27, 2014 of Blessed Pope John XXIII and Blessed Pope John Paul II. We entrust our country Nigeria to the hands of God. And we pray, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Nigeria that Nigerians be granted the grace to cooperate with God and with one another in building a just, peaceful and prosperous nation.

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Archbishop, Catholic Archdiocese of Jos
President

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